DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
REVIEWED BY RLS DATE 10/25/82
RDS or EDS EXT.
TS MCH.
RELEASE IA or FOI

R 123

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

AI Index: AFR 19/02/79
Distr: NS/PO/CO/AD

Amnesty International
International Secretariat
10 Southampton Street
London WC2E 7HF
England

26 June 1979

RECENT HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN EMPIRE

Amnesty International published a News Release on 14 May 1979 concerning the arrest and subsequent death in April 1979 of between 50 and 100 young people in the Central African Empire. The present background paper describes in greater detail the context in which these arrests and deaths occurred and also supplies some more general information about the violations of human rights in the Central African Empire.

The January 1979 Demonstrations in Bangui

In January 1979 Emperor Bokassa ordered the implementation of a regulation requiring all school children to wear uniforms. This order sparked off demonstrations which later developed into a more general protest against the government. The demonstrators, who were mostly students and school children, complained about the government's failure to pay student grants and civil servant's salaries for several months. Government employees, who include both officials and school teachers, had not been paid for between two and five months. The demonstrators also demanded an increase in the standard minimum wage, which was only 130 CFA Francs per day (US $ 0.60). Opposition to Emperor Bokassa's government in recent months has been strongest among students and school children - many of their parents have been unwilling to participate in protests against the government for fear of being arrested or killed.

The demonstrations which began in the capital, Bangui, on 18 January were suppressed with considerable violence. The Emperor announced over Bangui radio that all public demonstrations were to cease and called in troops to enforce his order. Although official sources subsequently claimed that only 13 people were killed as a result of this

repression, eye-witnesses have reported that soldiers shot indiscriminately into the crowds and that troops later raided several different parts of Bangui killing large numbers of young people. These observers reported that between 400 and 500 people were killed.

The demonstrations were finally suppressed on 21 January but in the following weeks a number of people suspected of organizing them were arrested. These included senior education officials, several lycée headmasters and some former student leaders. The unrest in Bangui also spread to other towns in the Central African Empire where further anti-government demonstrations took place during February. Many schools which had been shut down as a result of the January demonstrations remained closed for much of February. However, the government eventually agreed to raise the standard minimum wage and to pay both salaries and student grants.

Some of the people detained after the January demonstrations are known to have been released in February or early March, but others were thought to be still in detention. In mid-March Amnesty International's Secretary General appealed by telegram to Emperor Bokassa to release all prisoners of conscience in the Central African Empire; this included some detainees arrested in 1979, but also others detained over the previous five years. In late March Emperor Bokassa replied to Amnesty International that all detainees had in fact been released on his 58th birthday, 22 February 1979. Amnesty International was unable to confirm that all prisoners of conscience had been released, and sources in Bangui suggested that most of those set free were convicted criminals, whereas numbers of political detainees remained in detention.

Arrests in early April

Further arrests were carried out in Bangui in April 1979 when the authorities began a concerted attempt to find the student leader who was alleged to have organized the January demonstrations and to be the president of a students' and school children's organization, ANECA (Association Nationale des Etudiants Centrafricains). Several student

leaders were arrested on 6 April and these arrests were followed two days later by the arrest of the Minister of Information, Barthelemy Yangongo, and several other government officials who were accused of producing tracts criticizing the government. On 9 April students at the Jean Bedel Bokassa University and school children in Bangui went on strike in protest at the student arrests. The government responded at once by ordering troops to occupy the university and by announcing that people participating in public meetings would be shot.

During the following week (10-18 April) university students and children continued to hold meetings in Bangui, varying their meeting places in order to avoid discovery. They also demonstrated their hostility to the government by throwing stones at official Government cars. Events came to a head when several policemen who tried to infiltrate a student meeting on 17 April were discovered and beaten. The Emperor responded by ordering the arrest of school children throughout Bangui.

The Arrests and killings of 18-20 April 1979

Arrests of large numbers of school-age children began on the morning of 18 April and continued until 20 April. The arrests took place in several different districts in Bangui, such as Boy-Rabe, Fou and Galabadja. Most of those arrested were boys between 12 and 16 years of age but at least one of those detained was a girl. The detainees also included some younger children aged eight to twelve and some older students aged 16 to 24. The arrests were carried out by members of Emperor Bokassa's Imperial Guard (Compagnie de Sécurité Impériale), which is staffed by members of Emperor Bokassa's own ethnic group from the south west of the country; those arrested appear in contrast to have been members of other ethnic groups.

The children who were arrested were treated extremely harshly. Any who attempted to resist arrest or who shouted anti-government slogans were beaten up and in some cases killed on the spot. Their prisoners were flung into the backs of lorries and beaten with rifle-butts, whips

and sticks with nails in them. The prisoners were then driven either to local police stations or to the main prison of Ngaragba. More than one hundred are known to have been taken in several lorry-loads to Ngaragba. By the time the lorries reached the prison many detainees were already dead, having died either from their wounds or as a result of being crushed underneath the weight of other prisoners in the lorries.

When the prisoners taken to Ngaragba reached the prison, guards hurled stones at them, killing several. The survivors were forced to drag the dead bodies out of the lorries; they were then taken to prison cells. They were initially held in large groups, but were later split up and placed in smaller cells. Although the cells measured only about two metres square, as many as 30 were crammed into each cell. The cells had tiny windows and hardly any air could reach the prisoners once the doors were shut. They were left without food or water in their stifling cells until the next day, by which time many were dead. One boy later reported that out of 30 in his cell, 22 had died. Later on, more prisoners were placed in his cell and a further 11 died.

Apart from the prisoners who died in their cells, some others are reported to have been deliberately tortured and killed at the prison. Survivors of the incidents have claimed that they saw Emperor Bokassa himself in the prison and that the Emperor had participated personally in the killings. Another survivor claims that a group of more than 20 boys were taken outside Bangui and were killed when stones were dropped on them.

Various sources place the total number of deaths which occurred at between 50 and 100. This is the figure which was publicized in Amnesty International's news release on 14 May 1979. One eye-witness alone counted 62 bodies; another claimed that almost 80 were killed in Ngaragba prison alone. It has been difficult to obtain confirmation of all the arrests and killings, but there is sufficient evidence to indicate that a large number of young people were subjected to brutal treatment and that many were killed.

Releases and Government denials of killings

At a meeting of the country's sole legal political party, MESAN (Mouvement pour l'Evolution de l'Afrique Noire) on 20 April Emperor Bokassa described himself as "Father and protector of all children, who constitute the country's future". He announced the release of all those who had been arrested with the exception of a few "troublemakers". A communiqué issued by the Bangui branch of MESAN on the same day condemned the "disorder, hate, division... and subversion organized by students and supported by an occult force" ("le désordre, la haine, la division...la subversion orchestrée par les étudiants et soutenue par une force occulte ...").

It is not known precisely how many children were released on 20 and 21 April, but one eye-witness reported that about 40 survivors were let out of Ngaragba prison. Relatives of many of the prisoners had been standing outside the prison crying and demanding the release of their children. Elsewhere, at the police stations and military posts where young people had been detained, prisoners had been harshly treated but killings did not occur on the same systematic basis. Emperor Bokassa has subsequently claimed that only one "marxist student leader" is still in detention, but has refused to state the identity of this prisoner.

Information about the arrests and killings in Bangui was slow to reach the outside world. This was due to the government's control of the press, the difficulties which witnesses and others who collected information about the killings had in getting the information out of the country and a general fear of reprisals. On 21 April, the French press agency AFP (Agence France Presse) reported that there had been disturbances in Bangui and that an attempt had been made to assassinate Emperor Bokassa. This report was denied by the Central African Empire authorities. Amnesty International did not receive reports of the events in Bangui until early May 1979. After obtaining independent confirmation of the reports that young people had been arrested and many killed, the organization sent a telegram to Emperor Bokassa on 11 May

protesting at the arrests and killings and expressing its horror at the events in Bangui. Amnesty International called on Emperor Bokassa to conduct a thorough public inquiry to find out who had been responsible and also urged the Emperor to take steps to prevent a repetition of the killings. Amnesty International expressed its concern at the absence of legal safeguards to prevent detainees in the Central African Empire from being brutally ill-treated.

In a news release issued on 14 May 1979 Amnesty International publicly condemned the arrests and killing of children in Bangui. The deaths of between 50 and 100 young people have subsequently been confirmed by further reports received by Amnesty International. However, in a statement issued on 16 May, the Central African Empire's Prime Minister, Henri Maidou, refuted Amnesty International's reports, and although he admitted that 50 students and school children had been detained, he claimed that they were all more than 16 years old and that they had all been freed on 20 April. He added that some 140 students and school children had avoided arrest on 18 April by fleeing across the Ubangui river to the town of Zongo in Zaïre and suggested that Amnesty International might have thought that some detainees had been killed because of the temporary disappearance of the 140 children who had sought refuge in Zaire. Amnesty International was already aware that a large number of children had fled from Bangui to avoid arrest in addition to those who were arrested and killed in Bangui.

Prime Minister Maidou's statement was repeated at a press conference on 17 May by Emperor Bokassa himself, who also reaffirmed his country's devotion to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the following week, while he was attending a summit conference attended by France and French-speaking African countries in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, Emperor Bokassa made further statements to the press in which he contradicted his remarks of the previous week. He admitted that young people, including school children, had been killed in Bangui during April, although he maintained that they were "grown-up youths" and not children. He said he did not know exactly how many young people had been killed. He suggested that the deaths had occurred during riots

which had been led by marxist students and said that a special government committee had been set up to establish how many school children were missing from all his country's schools.

DECLASSIFIED

While the Emperor was at Kigali, Amnesty International's reports of the deaths in Bangui were confirmed at a press conference on 22 May by the Central African Empire's Ambassador in Paris, General Sylvestre Bangui, who at the same time announced his resignation as Ambassador and as a General in the Empire's armed forces.

At the end of the Franco-African summit in Kigali, five governments attending the meeting agreed to send a commission of inquiry to the Central African Empire in order to investigate the reports of the arrests and killing of young people. The commission is to comprise members from Ivory Coast, Liberia, Rwanda, Senegal and Togo, and they are expected to submit a report to the governments of all the states attending the Franco-African summit in Kigali.

Amnesty International Concerns in the Central African Empire

Apart from expressing its serious concern about recent arrests and killings in Bangui, Amnesty International is concerned by the following long term violations of human rights in the Central African Empire.

1. The long term detention without charge or trial of suspected opponents or critics of Emperor Bokassa. These include detainees arrested in January and April 1979, but also many others who have disappeared since Emperor Bokassa came to power in 1966 and whose relatives have not been informed of their fate.

2. The inadequacy of judicial procedures and the use of summary courts to try those arrested for political reasons, who are usually convicted either for crimes against state security or for embezzling public funds.

DECLASSIFIED

3. The harsh conditions of imprisonment, particularly at Ngaragba prison in Bangui, and the high mortality rate among political

prisoners. The Porte Rouge (Red Door) section of Ngaragba prison contains three cells where political prisoners are sometimes held in extremely cramped conditions. Food is inadequate, medical aid is grossly insufficient and prisoners are denied visits or any contact with their families.

4. The use of torture and other forms of cruel treatment during the interrogation of prisoners. The best documented cases occurred on 18-20 April 1979, but other political detainees are known to have been regularly beaten and tortured.

5. The use of cruel and inhuman punishments, including beatings and amputation, which sometimes result in death. In July 1972 Life-President Bokassa, as he was then, decreed that thieves should be punished on the first occasion by having their left ear cut off. In the same month this punishment was carried out on three convicted thieves. When further thefts occurred in Bangui, however, Life-President Bokassa responded by ordering that 45 suspected thieves who were then in detention should be punished by being severely beaten by soldiers. The Life-President himself took part in the assaults on the prisoners, three of whom died as a result of the beating. The corpses, along with the other prisoners who had been severely beaten, were put on public display in Bangui on 1 August 1972.

6. The use of the death penalty. On several occasions prisoners suspected of complicity in attempts to assassinate Emperor Bokassa have been executed by firing squad after summary trials. On other occasions the Emperor has arbitrarily decreed the use of the death penalty for crimes punished in less severe ways by the country's Penal Code. In June 1972 for example he decreed that all men in prison for murdering their wives should be executed.

One of the most serious aspects of the violation of human rights in the Central African Empire concerns allegations that the Head of State has on repeated occasions personally participated in assaults and been present during killings. In July 1977 the Emperor personally assaulted

a British journalist suspected by the Central African Empire authorities of being a South African spy. Most recently, in April 1979, the Emperor is alleged to have been present during the killing of several detainees at Ngaragba prison.

The Emperor's attitude towards international standards of human rights is also ambiguous: in May 1979 he reaffirmed his country's devotion to the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, when he suspected that the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kurt Waldheim, had protested against the beatings in Bangui in July 1972, he called him a pimp, a colonialist and an imperialist ("de maquereau, de colon et d'impérialiste").